Japanese-American monument unveiled

WWII servicemen, internees honored

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WASHINGTON -- Recalling the pride of having served their country and the pain of being viewed with suspicion by their fellow Americans during World War II, Japanese Americans gathered here Friday to unveil a lasting monument to their patriotism.

Under a burning sun at the edge of the U.S. Capitol grounds, Transportation Sec. Norman Mineta, the first Japanese-American cabinet member, declared the National Monument to Japanese American Patriotism "a message of faith in this nation, a message of hope and ultimately a message of American redemption."

The memorial, a bronze sculpture of two cranes struggling against barbed wire surrounded by a curving stone wall, pays homage to the 33,000 Japanese Americans who served in the armed forces, mainly in segregated units, in World War II. It also commemorates the 120,000 Japanese Americans and other civilians who were forced from their homes in California, Arizona, Washington and Oregon and shipped to internment camps soon after the Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and other American military bases in Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941.

The memorial's cranes, emblems of good fortune and long life, are intended to symbolize the ability to rise above limitations and overcome the pain of oppression. The names of eachinternment camp and the number of Japanese Americans held there are etched into the surrounding wall, as are the names of 800 Japanese Americans who died in military service. A reflecting pool containing five large stones is intended to represent the generations of Japanese Americans.

Bishop Roy I. Sano of Oakland dedicated the memorial first to the isei, the Japan-born immigrants imprisoned by the country they had chosen as their home. He also dedicated it to the nisei -- the second generation, many of whom volunteered to serve in the armed forces.

"In no other time in history have we seen such courage, strength and patriotism," he said.

Sano, 71, a retired United Methodist bishop who teaches religion at Oakland's Pacific School of Religion, was 12 when he, his mother and brothers were "evacuated" from their Imperial Valley home and sent on a city bus across the desert to a relocation camp in Poston, Ariz. His father, a farmer, had already been carted off to North Dakota where the FBI held him for six months, Sano said, "ostensibly to see if he had any ties to Japan."

As a child in the camps, Sano said, the gravity of the situation escaped him as he discovered scores of new Japanese-American playmates. It was only years later, he said, that "I learned how it devastated us economically, how our family life was devastated."

With the exception of Tule Lake and Manzanar internment camps in California, most of the 10 Japanese internment camps in the United States were inland, in such states as Wyoming and Arkansas.

Yet several "assembly centers" -- surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed military police -- were constructed throughout California. Some were at horse racetracks (Tanforan on the Peninsula and Santa Anita in Southern California); some were at migrant worker camps (Marysville and Sacramento) and some were even at mill sites (Pinedale). The centers were designed to confine Japanese Americans until they could be transferred to internment camps.

Many, like Tosh Okamoto, went into military service straight from the camps.

Okamoto, 77, was removed with his family from their Renton, Wash., home and taken to the Tule Lake center before he was drafted into the U.S. Army's segregated 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

"We went into serve under very, very different circumstances than our fellow Americans went into," Okamoto said. "We felt it was very important to prove our loyalty because our loyalty was suspect."

These days Okamoto, who lives in Seattle, rarely discusses the war years with his four children. But he said he hopes the memorial expresses what he sometimes cannot -- the anguish of being targeted for discrimination and the satisfaction of living in a country that tries to redress its wrongs.

"I would like them to know that we need to, as a country, recognize what happens to certain people because of the color of their skin or because of their beliefs. But I also want them to know we have the greatest country in the world," he said.

The $12 million memorial was largely paid for with private donations from veterans and other groups. Mineta and Rep. Bob Matsui, D-Sacramento, both of whom were interned as children, attended the dedication, as well as

both of whom were interned as children, attended the dedication, as well as Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, and Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, who belatedly received the Medal of Honor last year for his WWII military service.

The monument has not been free from controversy. It includes an inscription celebrating patriotism penned by Mike Masaoka, the deceased leader of the national Japanese American Citizens League, who has been accused by activist groups of collaborating with the federal government and even supporting internment.

Cressey Nakagawa, a San Francisco attorney who served as a campaign chairman for the National Japanese American Memorial Foundation, defended using Masaoka's lines, saying the controversy "was created by those who didn't go through the experience," and who see it through the lens of the post-civil rights movement.

"They just don't understand that at a different time and place in American history there was no organization capable of taking on the government," Nakagawa said.

Nakagawa said he hopes to enlist the monument in Smithsonian Institutions education programs and other exhibits to teach more people about the experience of Japanese Americans.

"Obviously the entire story can't be told on a wall," he said.